

**DEATH**  
*on*  
**WINDMILL**  
**WAY**



# Prologue



## DECEMBER

“Oh, it’s you,” said Gordon Haslett, his voice tinged with its usual irritation. “You’re always sneaking up on me. Drives me nuts. You just appear like a ghost. Trying to scare the hell out of me?”

Gordon propped the rake against the tree and wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, leaving a smear of dirt along his face. This small dose of physical labor had intensified his breathing, causing his chest to rise and fall dramatically under his vest. After taking a few gulps from a bottle of water, he examined his visitor critically. “So are you going to help me or what? Don’t just stand there watching me. We both know this isn’t *my* damn job.”

He turned and resumed raking the stack of wet leaves that were blocking the door to the garden shed. They were soggy from the rain and stacked together in sad little clumps. The air smelled moldy, of musty earth. Gordon had apparently been

out there for a while, as the brick path leading upward to the shed had already been cleared. He turned gruffly when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“What?” he barked.

His visitor held out a handkerchief, and motioned towards the beading sweat on Gordon’s forehead. Gordon grabbed the cloth.

“Thanks.”

He pressed the handkerchief firmly to his head and aggressively wiped his entire face.

“What the hell?” yelled Gordon, suddenly dropping the handkerchief and taking a step back. “Damn, something stung me!”

Gordon began furiously slapping his face, then stopped and glanced around in confusion. He held one index finger to the side of his face. His skin was burning hot. Suddenly his entire face began to swell, and his eyes were enveloped in clouds of puffiness.

“What the . . .” He couldn’t finish his sentence. Instead, Gordon clutched his throat and dropped to his knees.

“Go get help,” he whispered.

His visitor nodded. And then turned and walked as slowly as possible back to the inn, and waited.

# 1



## OCTOBER

*(Ten months later)*

**I**t was a glorious fall night in East Hampton. The sky was inky black with thin clouds racing past a full moon, and the ancient trees along the village streets cast long shadows in the silver moonlight. In the distance, the ocean waves murmured, providing a romantic background soundtrack. The air outside was crisp, not too chilly, but with just enough kick to necessitate roaring fires in the Windmill Inn's public rooms. It was a cozy Friday evening; just how innkeeper Antonia Bingham had imagined it would be when she dreamed of her move to the East Coast from California. Combined with the medley of delicious smells wafting from the kitchen, the weather and atmosphere gave Antonia a sense of great satisfaction.

The dining room of the Windmill Inn was by no means filled to capacity, but for the first time in the six weeks since Antonia had opened the restaurant, half of the tables were oc-

cupied. She had heard, of course, that it takes a while for new restaurants to gain momentum, particularly when they are replacing old restaurants that had reputations for terrible service and inedible food. But still, those first few nights when the seats remained empty she had felt completely disheartened. Not to mention embarrassed: the sound of every ice cube clinking in a glass seemed magnified and the busboys were too eager to replace half-eaten rolls, just to have something to do. But gradually—very gradually—reservations had picked up, with locals and weekenders popping by, eager to try a new place, and more guests booking rooms at the inn and venturing down to try Antonia’s home-cooked meals.

Finally, in Antonia’s mind, the future was beginning to look a little brighter. She hoped she wasn’t delusional; she was by nature an optimist who chose to look at the bright side of things. However, Antonia’s optimism made her prone to bad judgment calls, resulting in infrequent but spectacular failures. “Older and wiser” was one of her mottos, and with her recent purchase of the inn, Antonia was hoping that she could put some of the knowledge and experience that she had acquired in her thirty-five years (twelve years of catering!) to good use. She just needed to avoid past mistakes.

Now, as Antonia roamed the sleek navy and white dining room, she surveyed it critically. It was a large space that seated sixty-five diners and the décor was comfortable, while also streamlined and uncluttered. Whereas Antonia had chosen to make the rest of the inn feel cozy-formal with antiques, lots of prints and colored fabrics, she had given the restaurant a

bright and crisp interior. The walls were painted eggshell white and held large canvases of modern art, mostly bright abstracts, but a few small, individually lit oil paintings as well. The floors had been stained a dark walnut wood, brushed smoothly and evenly. In the front of the room, by the maître d' station, was a dark azure lacquered bar. Its eight barstools had button-tufted backs and sides studded with pewter nail head trim. Beyond that were a dozen freestanding tables set formally with starched white linens, white china and blue Murano goblets.

When she was decorating the inn, Antonia had sat on dozens of chairs in an effort to find the most comfortable; one that would encourage diners to linger and order more courses. The winners were softly rounded and upholstered in blue, with gently sloping arms and maple-stained legs. In the back of the room, beyond the swinging door to the kitchen was a nook housing four booths, their banquettes covered in in cobalt vinyl with white piping. Antonia had debated whether or not the booths made the place feel too casual, but tonight they had allowed her to successfully accommodate a last minute party of seven. Smiling benevolently at the happy group, Antonia knew she had made the right decision in adding the booths. They made the restaurant feel complete.

Tonight Antonia was clad in her best black satin dress, replete with a plunging neckline to both accentuate her ample breast and move everyone's eyes away from her widening girth. (*Ah, the havoc that working with food wreaks on your waistline, Antonia often despaired.*) She had on the lowest high heels that she could find, as anything even a half an inch higher caused

major wobbling in the manner of a drunken streetwalker. It was the last thing Antonia would have liked to have been wearing—sweats, elastic waisted ruffled skirts, soft cardigans and Crocs were more her speed—but her manager had told her that she needed to “sex it up and work the room” in order to encourage first-time customers to become repeat customers. She hardly thought that her looking all dolled up would entice diners, especially in this small town, but with all of her money on the line with the restaurant and inn, she agreed to do whatever had to be done for the bottom line. As a result, Antonia had pulled out all the stops tonight, blowing dry her glossy black hair until it fell in cascading waves down to her shoulders and even applying makeup. Her cupid’s bow lips were deep red, her porcelain cheeks blushed pink and her already thick lashes fluttered darkly around her bright blue eyes.

“Another wonderful dinner, Antonia, thank you,” said Joseph Fowler as he signed his check and flipped the leather-bound cardholder closed. He placed it on the table next to the small pumpkin centerpiece. After finishing the last sip of his sherry, he dabbed his mouth with the cloth napkin.

“Thank you, Joseph. You always make my day!” Antonia beamed at her favorite dinner guest.

Joseph was a renowned writer of historical fiction. He had been recently widowed when his wife of thirty-plus years died after a long bout with cancer. Joseph was Antonia’s first customer at the restaurant, and for that she was eternally grateful, especially as he had turned out to be a tremendous cheerleader for her. An elegant man, with refined features (aquiline nose,

arched eyebrows, chiseled cheekbones, impeccably combed silver hair) he always dressed in custom-fitted monogrammed dress shirts and a bowtie, cords or khakis (depending on the weather), and a beautiful tweed blazer. As he was still only in his early sixties, Antonia fervently hoped he would find romance again. It was too soon for her to play matchmaker but she had already targeted some of the ladies who came to tea at the inn as potential suitors. Should she mind her own business? Probably. But that wasn't really her style.

“Joseph, I'd love your feedback, what did you think of the truffled polenta with Gorgonzola? It's a new recipe I'm trying out. You can tell me honestly.”

He smiled. “It was exquisite.”

“I'm not fishing for compliments, are you sure?”

He patted her hand. “My dear, I would have it every night if I could.”

“You know how to make a lady happy,” she said, wagging her finger at him. “I'll take your word for it, but I still think it needs some tweaking—maybe a different herb. It says rosemary but I have to be honest, I'm not the biggest rosemary fan. It sort of tastes like shampoo, don't you think? I much prefer tarragon or sage. Even chervil. Thyme could work, but it's kind of wimpy. Well, we'll see . . .”

“My advice to you is don't over-think it. The best thing about your food is that you cook from the heart. And it shows.”

“Well, I try.”

Antonia motioned for Glen, the maitre d', to assist Joseph into his scooter. Joseph had suffered a bout of polio as a child



and although he could walk with the assistance of crutches, in recent years he had primarily used a scooter to get around.

“There ya go, Mr. Fowler,” said Glen in his strong Long Island accent. “I tell you, I could use one of these things to escape from the ladies.”

Glen was attractive but in an unctuous, hair-gelled way, like Guido the Killer Pimp. A failed actor with an inflated ego, he was a high-maintenance employee but very good at charming women and making customers feel at home.

Joseph chuckled. “Well, I don’t exactly have that problem.”

“All in good time.”

“Have a great night,” said Antonia cheerily.

Joseph winked. “You too, my lady.”

Antonia moved around the room to greet other guests and to solicit any suggestions they might have about the food. She enjoyed meeting people as much as she enjoyed cooking, and it was always an internal debate as to where she should spend more time. It was fun for her to find out where guests were from, and what their story was, but at the same time, she also adored her time in the kitchen, concocting her latest culinary adventure, darting about, plating dishes. If she could slice herself in half and do both she certainly wouldn’t hesitate.

After sending off a cute couple that was visiting from New York City (house-hunting) she stopped off at Len and Sylvia Powers’ table. Len headed up security at the Dune Club, a very fancy country club on the ocean, and his wife was a teacher. Tonight they had brought their son in to celebrate his twenty-fifth birthday.

“You’ve done an amazing job, Antonia, I tell you, just amazing. The inn looks gorgeous and the food is fabulous,” said Sylvia Powers, her big cerulean eyes twinkling. She patted her mouth with her napkin, leaving a stain of the hot pink lipstick that was her trademark, then patted her stomach appreciatively. “I tell you, it is so wonderful that you brought this place back to life. And so quickly, what was it, only six months?” She didn’t wait for an answer but continued, “I can’t tell you how sad it was to see it fall into disrepair all the years Gordon Haslett owned it. What a mean guy! And that made the place mean. We stopped coming here long ago, didn’t we Len?”

“Well you didn’t really have a choice, Mom,” said Matt, giving her a sly smile.

She frowned. “Nonsense. We had a choice. That business was all settled. Right, Len?”

Len Powers glanced up from his apple cheddar crisp, and looked around, dazed by the interruption. He was a large man, with a belly that arrived in a room ten seconds before he did. Everything about him was big and fleshy, from his bulbous nose to his ruddy cheeks and giant ears. “I can’t talk! I don’t want to tear myself away from this incredible dessert.”

Sylvia laughed. “I already inhaled my dessert. I tell you, that chocolate caramel cake with the little dots of sea salt was majestic. This is our third time here and every time I sample some new yummys.”

“Thank you,” Antonia beamed.

“This may seem like a back-handed compliment but you

cook in a very homey style. The way I like to think I can cook, but actually can't. I like that it's not all that fancy new wave stuff—foams and edible flowers. That just sounds disgusting to me. Some of those cooking shows, I think, yuck! Fois Gras ice cream? Come on. When I have ice cream, I don't want meat in it. But I'm not a food snob. I just prefer food that tastes how it's supposed to. Don't mess with what ain't broke."

"Well, I'm so glad you liked it," replied Antonia. "And thank you for your kind words. I say to everyone I know that the biggest compliment they can give me is to spread the news around. I want everyone to know that there's a new sheriff in town, and the Windmill Inn is back in business."

"Oh everyone knows that already, Antonia," said Sylvia, chattering on. "East Hampton is a small town. Especially when the summer people are gone. Ah, the summer people! Did you know we call the season '100 days of hell'? Oh, they're not all bad, I'm joking. But it's nice to have the town back to ourselves, where we can get up in everybody's business! Ha, I'm joking again. But of course everyone knows that the inn changed hands when Gordon Haslett died. In fact, Matt was there—he's a paramedic." Sylvia gestured proudly at her son.

Antonia was having a hard time following Sylvia's dramatic stream-of-consciousness rambling. She looked to Matt for clarification.

Matt put down his fork and nodded. He had a pretty boy face composed of dainty features: a small straight nose, plump red lips, and thickly lashed eyes. There was also something morose and gloomy about his temperament that Antonia was

certain thrilled girls who were attracted to the dark, broody types. Looking at his jolly, big-boned parents, it was hard to tell where Matt had come from.

“Yes, I was the first responder to the scene,” he said solemnly and with an air of authority. “I arrived less than oh-five minutes after the call. But there was nothing I could do, he was already D.O.A.”

“Well, I’ve no doubt you would have done everything you could have,” said Antonia sympathetically. She patted his shoulder warmly. “But obviously there’s not a whole lot you *can* do when someone suffers a massive heart attack and dies before you get there.”

“Right,” said Matt, nodding, his face oddly empty of emotion.

“*If* it was a heart attack,” said Sylvia. She nudged her spoon into her husband’s crisp and took a huge bite for herself.

“Mom,” warned Matt, rolling his eyes. “Let’s not go there.”

Sylvia shrugged and put her hand to her lips to block the view of food while she talked with her mouth full. “Didn’t you say, sweetie, that you thought he died of a bee sting?”

Matt squirmed uncomfortably. “Official cause of death was a heart attack.”

“Yes, but one that was brought on by a bee sting,” prompted Sylvia. She dove into her husband’s dessert for another bite.

“Yes, I did suspect that,” said Matt officiously. “He had a red welt on his cheek at the two o’clock position, and his face was inflamed concurrent with an allergic reaction. But that idea wasn’t pursued.”

“Why not?” asked Antonia, vaguely intrigued by this new information, gossip or not. She motioned for a busboy to refill the Powers’ water glasses.

Matt rolled his eyes. “The family didn’t want to. Didn’t want an autopsy. But it was December, and who gets stung by a bee in December?” He was indignant.

Antonia nodded. “I guess that is strange.”

“They thought I was an alarmist, being swayed by the whole reputation of the inn . . .” he continued.

“Um, Matthew . . .” his mother interrupted. She widened her eyes and shook her head.

Admonished, Matt abruptly stopped speaking. Sylvia shifted uncomfortably in her chair, and Len shoved a large bite of crisp into his mouth. Antonia glanced at each of them quizzically.

“What is the reputation of the inn?” she asked finally.

Matt looked past her at the wall. “Um, nothing, just an old superstition.”

“What’s the superstition?” pressed Antonia.

Sylvia sighed. “It’s nothing, just a silly thing. And we all know that old stories like that are nothing more than stories. Someone wanted to concoct a ghost story and that’s all it was.”

“But what was it?” asked Antonia again.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, dear,” said Sylvia in a cool, reassuring voice (one that she probably used on her third graders at the John Marshall School). “I tell you, it’s nothing.”

“You can’t leave me hanging!” Antonia said in a light voice, although underneath, her heart was racing. “Come on, now,

help me out. I bought this place sight unseen eight months ago on the advice of my friend Genevieve. I moved all the way from Petaluma to East Hampton, a town that I had never stepped foot in. Then I poured every last penny I could to get it up and running. I have eight guestrooms and a restaurant, and a dozen full time employees. I need to know every facet of the inn's reputation so I know what I'm up against."

Antonia blinked her long lashes several times and smiled brightly, in an effort to alleviate the panic she was feeling. Ever since she'd bought the inn she had been experiencing moments of extreme nervousness and self-doubt, basically questioning her impulsivity. Had she made a mistake? Perhaps she should have been more suspicious of how quickly the sister of the deceased had accepted her low-ball offer. She had congratulated herself on a steal, but maybe she had been the one who was swindled? She wished she would have done more research, but she always became completely restless whenever she was in front of a computer. Honestly, she found the Internet to be a colossal waste of time in regards to everything excluding searching for recipes or antiques. But perhaps if she had taken time to Google Gordon Haslett's death she wouldn't be having this conversation.

The Powers family all glanced at each other uneasily. Finally Len spoke. He held his fork in the air, indicating he would be brief so that he could return to his dessert.

"The story about the Windmill Inn is that the owners die under suspicious circumstances. Now, it's just a story, makes the place more dramatic."

“I actually think one of the previous owners conjured it up just to attract some business,” added Sylvia quickly. “I mean, I taught some of the kids of one of the owners, there was nothing there, oh dear, now wait . . .”

She stopped speaking, as if remembering something.

“Well is it true?” Antonia asked. “I mean, before Gordon Haslett, did the other owners die of suspicious circumstances?”

Sylvia and Len exchanged a look. “Well,” began Sylvia. But she didn’t finish her sentence.

Len cocked his head to the side, as if he was thinking, and finally shrugged.

“It’s kind of true,” said Matt finally.

“Kind of?” asked Antonia. “What does that mean?”

“I guess it means yes. Some of the owners of the inn have died under suspicious circumstances.”

“Great,” said Antonia weakly. She needed a drink.

## 2



**T**he Windmill Inn was finally quiet at midnight. The diners had almost all left by ten-thirty, except for a last lingering couple who, judging from their body language, appeared to be on their third or fourth date. They stayed until eleven, after working out whether or not they would be retreating to their own homes or having a sleepover. Only three of the guest rooms at the inn were occupied and when Connie, the front desk receptionist, confirmed that everyone had retired for the evening, Antonia had locked all of the doors to the inn with the exception of the two in the kitchen.

It was Glen's responsibility to shut down the restaurant for the night but Antonia usually helped him out, since it was still early days. It was important for her to establish a hands-on approach from the get-go so the staff would know that she was firmly in control. And it was always important to keep track of the money. Other restaurateurs had told her that it was crucial



to watch out for skimming, no matter how much you trusted your employees. They advised her to get a sense of how much was coming in so that she could sense if anything was going out that should not be.

Antonia and Glen went over the books, locked up the bar, and looked at the reservations for the following evening. While he ducked in to the office to print out the next day's menu, Antonia went into the kitchen. Juan and Albert, the busboy/dishwashers, were just finishing up when Antonia went into the staff changing room to switch out of her high heels and into her Crocs. When she returned they were leaving and she shut the back door behind them, pressing firmly to confirm the click of the latch. The staff had been having trouble with that door closing all the way; it was still warped from the summer heat. Often it would blow wide open and bang loudly against the wall, startling anyone who was standing next to it.

When Antonia went back to the dining room, Glen had returned with a stack of printed menus, which he placed on the maitre d' stand. He turned off the lights and shrugged into his soft leather jacket. She walked with him back into the kitchen so he could exit from the side door. When he opened the door a gust of wind came flooding in.

"Wow, it's picking up out there," said Antonia.

"Yeah. You're lucky you don't have anywhere to drive to get to your bed."

"I know. Living at work does have its plusses."

"Oh, I forgot to mention, Antonia. This guy from a local

microbrewery came by tonight. I told him to come during the day since we don't order during dinner hour."

"Good idea. I'll let Marty handle it. Goodnight, now."

Marty was Antonia's sous chef and he was a lot tougher than she; she liked to let him deal with the vendors. Antonia firmly shut the door behind Glen and twisted the lock. She turned and glanced around the kitchen to make sure everything was in place. The glasses were drying on racks on the counter and all of the prep stations were wiped down. The pots and pans were hung neatly on their pegs. It was difficult to believe that just an hour ago this place had been buzzing. Antonia flicked off the big overhead lights and walked towards the pantry to do the same. It was quiet now, with only the hum of the two industrial dishwashers making a fuss. Antonia heard Glen start his car, then watched as his headlights flicked across the darkened ceiling when he exited.

Antonia walked back through the dimmed dining room for one last proprietary glance. She thought of all of the people who had come through the door of the inn over the last hundred and fifty years. Throughout much of the nineteenth century the Windmill Inn had housed a tannery in the barn out back; guests stayed in the main building while their saddles were treated. Were any of their ghosts lurking there now? Antonia shuddered; all she needed was a headless horseman! She glanced around at the shadowed tables. Antonia had always thought that empty restaurants looked a little eerie, as if the ghosts of the people who had just dined there somehow dissipated into thin air. She wondered if she was particularly on

edge tonight having just heard the news that Gordon Haslett's death was somehow suspicious. Had previous innkeepers really met untimely fates? She pushed the thought out of her mind.

Instead of heading straight across to the small staff hallway that led to her apartment, Antonia made a right and walked towards the front door. While she had taken special care to sand down the floors in the dining room, the floors in the rest of the inn had been left more or less in their original state. Over the years they had buckled under the extreme seasonal oscillation between temperatures, and were squeaky and uneven. Antonia had placed a few Oriental carpet runners along the way, but they did nothing to contain the noise and tonight it seemed as if the floorboards creaked particularly loudly under her feet. The chandelier in the front hall was lit but dimly. Its light was the only one that seeped through the other public rooms.

Antonia turned left into the parlor to make sure that the staff had straightened up before they departed. A few glowing embers amidst the ashes were all that was left of the fire that had been roaring earlier. Her eyes darted around the room, straining to identify objects in the shadows. Although she knew that there was a seating arrangement with a sofa and two club chairs in the forefront of the room, they looked different in the darkness. Antonia walked over to the backgammon table against the wall and clicked on the bouillotte lamp. There was no need to completely shut down all of the light in the building. What if a guest was restless and came down to read? These things had to be thought through! Being a novice inn owner was challenging and Antonia was going on instinct. She just hoped that she

would do a good enough job that the guests would return and would recommend the inn to friends. That was one reason she always solicited advice and impressions from her guests. She pulled the cord to light the bright bulb and all of the furniture in the room came into clear focus. *There*, she thought. *Much better.*

Antonia moved towards the chairs and picked up various pillows to re-fluff them. They didn't really need it, but something was compelling her to remain in the room. She noticed that a book on Hamptons style had been left on the coffee table so she returned it to its place, sliding it into the shelf next to the fireplace. Antonia then straightened the side chairs that leaned against the wall and bent down to touch the soil in the potted plant to make sure that it was damp. They were all minor adjustments, ones that no one but a perfectionist would notice, but that's what made Antonia a natural innkeeper.

Suddenly Antonia stiffened. What was that noise? She thought she heard something scratching. She paused and listened. There it was again! It sounded like fingernails scraping a blackboard. She strained her ear to find which direction it was coming from and waited. Her head jerked towards the back of the room, from where the sound was emanating. Taking a deep breath, she proceeded to the back, where there was another cluster of upholstered furniture with plush cushions that you could sink into underneath the bay windows. Antonia hesitated for a moment when she reached it, her knees bumping into the low coffee table. She glanced around apprehensively. She waited for the sound. Once again, there was the noise.

Antonia paused. An image of swarming bees attacking flashed in her mind. Her stomach turned with nervous anticipation. She slowly turned her head, but to her relief, she realized that the noise she was hearing was only the wind slapping a branch from the birch tree against the window. She exhaled, suddenly realizing that she had been holding her breath.

*This was so silly,* she told herself. *Why am I psyching myself up?* Last night, before she had heard the suspicious deaths rumor, she had been fine. In fact, she had been sleeping in this inn for six months and never felt frightened. She wasn't a scaredy cat; that wasn't her thing. Hell, she had survived an ex-husband who'd used all of his energy to scare and harass her for years. So why was she freaking herself out *now*? Just because the Powers family had told her that the previous innkeepers had died suspiciously? It was absurd.

Antonia stood up straight and strode firmly out of the parlor. This was her inn. She was the boss! She walked towards reception and gave it a cursory once over, and also glanced briskly inside the deserted library. No one was awake in the inn. There was nothing to give her pause. She made her way back down the hall towards her apartment, refusing to be disturbed by the shadows along the wall. She walked past the small antique elevator that was used to transport luggage or guests who needed assistance and peered through the glass. No one was hiding there. Antonia promised herself that she would not let this ghost story about the inn haunt her. She would not succumb to hysteria.

# 3



## SATURDAY

**E**ast Hampton, renowned for its award-winning beaches, picturesque villages, and the ethereal light that had inspired some of the greatest American painters, is nestled on the tip of Long Island's south shore, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean on one side and various bays on the other. Everything about the town is profoundly quaint; from the acres of farmland bursting with abundant crops to the shaded streets lined with windmills, shingled houses and churches that actually look like churches. The center of the village is comprised of two streets—Main Street and Newtown Lane—that meet in an L-shape, and are home to neatly kept and freshly painted one- to two-story storefronts. Since the end of the 19th century when the Hamptons became a resort community, summers have attracted the rich and famous, not to mention a chaotic amount of tourists. But for all the glitz and fanfare, most of the time East Hampton feels like any other small town in America.

Antonia Bingham had never thought she would leave California. She was born and raised in Petaluma, and had assumed she would stay there forever. Why wouldn't she? But Antonia hadn't counted on the relentless abuse of her ex-husband, Philip. During their marriage she had been a virtual prisoner, and after she finally mustered up the nerve to leave him, Philip embarked on a tyranny of terror that made her life a living hell. Her pleas to the police went unheard. And of course that would be the case: Philip was one of them, a sergeant in the force beloved by his brothers in arms. Restraining orders, calls to 911, and reason didn't matter. No one believed her and eventually, no one listened. Until one fateful day when Philip showed up at Antonia's house and her frail father tried to intervene on her behalf. A kick to the stomach from Philip sent her father to the hospital where he died two weeks later from complications. Philip escaped jail time with an Academy Award winning, teary-eyed and remorseful performance in criminal court, but she won a restraining order and settlement against him in civil court. It was that money that she had used to purchase the inn, and the inheritance from her parents that she used to maintain it.

Her friend Genevieve, who had worked for Antonia's catering business as a waitress after a relationship with a vintner in Sonoma went sour, sold Antonia on East Hampton, the town where Genevieve's family had rented a house every August. She talked of lush seasons, a town as charming as any Norman Rockwell painting, unspoiled vistas, sandy dunes rolling down to the edge of the blue Atlantic, and Antonia was

sold. It was impulsive, but something drastic had to be done. She said goodbye to her parents who were buried side-by-side in the Calvary Cemetery, and made the opposite trip that her ancestors had made one hundred years ago when they set out for California. But in both cases, the Binghamms were searching for the “promised land.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You’re a die-hard, too!”

Antonia turned around and then nearly gasped out loud. She couldn’t believe her eyes! It was Nick Darrow, the movie star, talking to her, Antonia Bingham, civilian. She knew he lived in East Hampton but she had not seen him until just now. And here he was, standing in front of her at Main Beach in all his handsomeness, two yellow labs frolicking at his heels, talking to *her*. And she was struck dumb.

“Excuse me?” she murmured, at least she thought she murmured, because she was too busy trying to control the blush that she was certain was creeping up over her pale white cheeks. Damn her English skin! When she was embarrassed it was as if she paraded it on her face like a scarlet letter.

“I said you’re a die-hard. Not many people are out on the beach at six-thirty in the morning in late October. And I know this is not a one-off because I’ve seen you here the past three weeks.”

“You have?” she squeaked.

“Yes. Sorry that sounds creepy. I’m not a stalker. I’m Nick,” he said, thrusting out his hand.



Of course he was, she knew *exactly* who he was, but *she* also didn't want to appear like a stalker. His handshake was firm, and his hands surprisingly warm on this brisk morning.

"I'm Antonia."

He wore a barely perceptible smile on his face, and yet his expression warmly conveyed a feeling that they were both in on the same joke. It was an intimate gaze, one that wholly embraced a person and created a cozy space for just the two of them. Antonia knew intellectually that it was just Nick Darrow's innate charisma, but he had it on a much higher level than most people. *That's why he's so famous*, thought Antonia. *He just has a spectacular, glowing energy.*

Whatever it was, Antonia was totally star-struck. She couldn't believe this was happening; it was surreal. And it was all so casual, as if he were just some guy on the beach. But he wasn't; he was Nick *Friggin'* Darrow! And although Nick was now in his late forties and definitely not the gorgeous poster boy that he once was, age totally agreed with him—he was more smoldering than ever. He still had very thick dark hair, albeit now graying at the temples, a strong jaw, blue eyes, which were amped up by the orange Patagonia that he was wearing, and plump lips. *Kissable lips*, Antonia thought. Yes, everything about Nick Darrow was sexy, including the zesty aftershave that she could slightly smell from a few feet away and the way his faded jeans hugged his muscular legs.

"So, are you on vacation? Some people would say you picked the wrong time of year, but I'd say you picked the very

best time to be in East Hampton,” said Nick with a smile. “I love it when the town clears out.”

He bent down and picked up a ball and threw it near the breaking waves. Both of his dogs took off in furious pursuit.

“No, I actually moved here a few months ago.”

“And you waited for the worst possible days to take up walking on the beach?”

He motioned to the barren sand around them. The sun had barely peeked out, and the breeze was ripping through the dunes as if getting the hell out of dodge. Even the waves appeared grumpy, lazily smacking the shore like a teenager dragged out of bed too early. The air was chilly, though the weatherman had promised temperatures in the high fifties.

Antonia laughed. “No. I used to walk later in the day. But now for work it’s better for me to leave early so I can be there when the guests wake up.”

“Where do you work?”

“I bought the Windmill Inn on Main Street.”

“Oh that’s *you*.”

He said it in such a way that made Antonia feel self-conscious. Had he heard about *her*? Was this a practical joke? Antonia peeked around to see if some camera crew would pop out of the bushes. Maybe he was a Nick Darrow impersonator? She studied him with squinted eyes. No, it was definitely him.

“Yes, I bought the inn. I did indeed,” said Antonia. *I did indeed?* She didn’t really talk like that. What was she, eighty? She wished she could say something really cool right now but

all she could think of adding was, “and I’m the chef at our restaurant.”

“*Really?*” he said in a drawn out, interested manner. “What kind of food?”

“I guess you’d call it American. Just sort of home cooking. Things people like to eat. Or at least, things I like to eat.”

He smiled. “And what do you like to eat?”

“Oh, you know, well, to be honest, my favorite food is bread. I could eat that all day long. And I don’t discriminate: it can be sourdough, raisin nut, olive, pretzel rolls, you name it . . .” she realized she was rambling, and about gluten, too. “But as I can’t serve bread exclusively, I also have things like roast chicken with crispy skin, baked stuffed lobster with bourbon-spiked butter, grilled pork loin, hash browns cooked in duck fat. Butterscotch pudding with whipped cream.”

“Wow! Sounds great! You’re making me hungry.”

“You’ll have to come by. I mean . . . if you’re around. Come by. No pressure,” she was embarrassed she was so forward so she quickly added “You know where the inn is, right?” She felt herself become redder.

“Of course. Everyone knows.”

“Yes, it’s been there for over a hundred and fifty years.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Sure. It’s a small town.”

“Right.”

Antonia wasn’t sure what to add to that. One of Nick’s dogs returned and dropped the slobbery tennis ball at his feet and

he in turn picked it up and hurled it across the sand. Antonia could sense the strength of his muscles even through his fleece. The dog took off again, bounding across the sand to retrieve it, with Nick watching him. Antonia realized that she was watching Nick watch the dog and instantly felt foolish. Was she supposed to linger or should she keep walking? The uncertainty made her blush deeper. To her relief, Nick returned his attention to her.

“So you’re not worried about the curse?”

“The curse?”

“Sure, you have to have heard about it before you bought the inn.”

“You mean that the innkeepers there die under suspicious circumstances?”

“Yes, that one.”

Whatever red was hovering in Antonia’s cheeks now drained. “Well, no one told me before I bought it. In fact, the first time I heard anything about it was last night. Now you’re the second person to alert me. So what’s the deal? Am I like, the biggest moron in town? Did I make the biggest mistake of my life? Which by the way, by all accounts, now sounds like it will end shortly.”

Nick Darrow laughed. He had a big, booming, hearty laugh that made the people who made him laugh feel intensely gratified.

“I don’t know; I’m sure it’s just local legend. I mean, there was nothing suspicious about the last guy who died, I think it was a heart attack.”

“I’ve heard it might have been a bee sting.”

“Bee sting, whatever. A bee sting isn’t suspicious, actually.”

“A bee sting in August isn’t suspicious,” replied Antonia.  
“But a bee sting in December is.”

Nick smiled. “True.”

“What about the guy before that guy?”

“I don’t really know, I just heard maybe he poisoned himself or something and they weren’t sure what happened.”

“Poisoned himself?” asked Antonia, her voice rising. “Great, just great. How many months do you give me?”

Nick put his hand firmly on Antonia’s shoulder. The warmth from his palm trickled down all the way to her toes.

“I have total faith that you’ll break the curse.”

She looked deep into his eyes and wished desperately that she was another type of woman; they type who could now reel off a coy, flirty little response, but instead she blurted, “I have bad luck.”

“You do?”

Antonia instantly began to backtrack. There was nothing tackier than someone unloading all his or her problems on a total stranger. Especially total strangers who happened to be movie stars. “I mean, just kidding. Anyway, how does everyone seem to know about this curse? Is there a library book I could take out to get to the bottom of it?”

“I don’t think anyone has written a book about it just yet,” said Nick.

“Okay, then how am I going to prepare myself to stave off my potential suspicious death? I need to be ready in case I acci-

dentally pick something poisonous from my garden and make a soup out of it.”

“You know what you can do? I’ve got a friend at *The East Hampton Star*. Larry Lipper, covers the crime beat. His office is on Main Street. Just stop by and tell him I sent you.”

“The *crime* beat?”

Nick laughed again. “Yeah, I know. He mostly writes about DUIs or reports on those 911 calls that people make where they think they heard something but it turned out to be a neighbor. But doesn’t matter. If there was anything to the inn story, Larry will know.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Antonia was oscillating between two extremes as she made her way back to the inn. On the one hand, she felt extreme elation at the fact that she had just had an entire conversation with *Nick Darrow*. He was handsome, he was nice, and he acted totally normal. It was literally as casual as talking to the guy at the hardware store, total chitchat. And yet this was a guy who had been voted *People Magazine’s* “Sexiest Man Alive”! But all of that excitement was tempered by the confirmation that the inn had a curse, and if lore proved true, her untimely demise was imminent. Antonia smacked her steering wheel as she headed along Ocean Avenue. Damn, had it been a totally stupid move buying the place? What had Genevieve talked her into? She had wanted a new start, a new adventure, but one that ended in homicide wasn’t exactly what she had in mind. She felt duped. Should she call her

broker and give him a piece of her mind? Demand her money back? The inn had already given her a fair share of problems in the six months she had owned it.

For one, the rambling three-story Georgian revival building was built in the late 1840s and required constant maintenance. It was so run down when Antonia purchased it that it had taken a solid five months to update the rooms and bathrooms and renovate the kitchen to a professional chef's kitchen that would accommodate the restaurant. She had totally missed the summer season and had to delay her opening, which was a major loss of potential income. And when one upgrade was finished something else always needed to be done: the exterior had to be repainted white, the shutters needed a fresh coat of green, the front yard had to be nuked and new sod lain and the brick path needed to be fixed before someone fell down and broke their neck. The to-do list was endless, and the fact that she was a bit of a control freak/ perfectionist didn't help. The one thing Antonia had on her side was naiveté, because if she had known what she was getting into, she never would have done it.

But now, to be honest, Antonia was glad that she had been ignorant. She loved her inn. She loved the antiques that she had chosen for the parlor and the crooked floors in the entryway and the unpredictable twists and turns of the hallways. And she loved East Hampton. The fluidity of the place appealed to her; she appreciated the way that population ebbed and flowed, just like the tides at Georgica beach. And now she loved everything a bit more because she had just met Nick Darrow and although

it was silly, it was so cool that he had even heard of her. Or well, not her, but that he had heard that someone had bought the inn, and that was her. Did that even make sense, she wondered?

The interaction had put a spring in her step and even made her a little flaky. She was usually good with names but upon returning to the inn, when she went to greet the couple from Rhode Island who were staying in Room Two, their names escaped her. And later, when the farmer came from Pike's to take her order for next week's vegetables, she completely blanked that she needed potatoes, which would require a phone call to amend. In fact she was so distracted all morning that she didn't even notice when Lucy Corning, the manager of the inn, came to find her in the kitchen. Antonia had been stirring the mix for ricotta doughnuts, dreamily fantasizing about kissing Nick by the dunes on the beach when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Antonia, are you okay?"

"Huh?" Antonia jumped, startled back into reality. She blinked several times before realizing where she was, and unfortunately, where she wasn't. "Sorry, I didn't hear you."

"I was calling your name, but you looked like you were a million miles away."

Antonia blushed. "I was just thinking about something."

A slight smile crept across Lucy's face as if she knew *exactly* what Antonia was thinking about, but she immediately dismissed it and got down to business.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you. But we have a situation."

Antonia sighed. She glanced at the small mousy woman in front of her. Lucy was probably in her early-to-mid-forties, waif-



thin, with one of those nondescript hair colors (is it brown? Is it dirty blond?) and one of those nondescript hair styles (bob? Shoulder length?) She was neither unattractive nor attractive—somehow just neutral. And clearly somewhere along the line, Lucy had been encouraged to go with an eclectic, vintage look because she insisted on wearing quirky black framed glasses, and either her trademark cashmere sweater set and retro A-line skirts, or dresses that made her look like an aging 1950s schoolgirl. Come to think of it, Lucy had even mentioned once that she worked at a vintage clothing store and found her style there. Antonia had raised her eyebrows, but kept mum.

Antonia didn't mean to be judgmental because Lucy had proven to be a competent employee—so competent, in fact, that Antonia had promoted her to manager from her previous position of bookkeeper. Lucy was amazingly prudent in helping keep Antonia in line with a strict budget. It was like having an in-house system of checks and balances. And it was a bonus that she had been working for the inn under Gordon, because she had the technical hospitality background that Antonia didn't possess yet. Antonia had high hopes for her, except she did notice that Lucy seemed to appear gleeful every time she had to report bad news, like a cancellation or a broken toilet.

“What's up?” Antonia finally asked.

“It's not good,” said Lucy gravely.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ladies, ladies, be quiet! It's Saturday morning, many of my guests are sleeping in. Please stop, oh geez, stop!”

There was so much yelling that Antonia's voice fell on deaf ears.

After working her way around the bottom of the staircase, with Lucy hot on her heels, Antonia swiftly inserted herself into the middle of the two women who were loudly fighting in the front hall of the inn. On one side was a voluptuous blond woman around the age of forty-five, who wore a jean jacket over a scoop-neck spandex floral dress. On the other side a wiry, pencil-thin brunette of about sixty, clad in a white zippered windbreaker over blue slacks. Both women were shrieking obscenities at each other, with the brunette desperately trying to seize hold of the small cardboard box that the blonde was clutching in her arms.

"Stop this right now!" bellowed Antonia at the top of her lungs.

They momentarily fell silent. From the doorway, Lucy gave Antonia a decisive nod of approval.

"Now, I don't know what is going on, but I know that this is *my* inn, and you ladies can't act like this here. Now tell me, what the heck *is* going on?"

They instantly spoke at once, their words accusing and angry, and the tone rapidly rose from normal speaking voices to a shouting match. Antonia put her thumb and index finger to her mouth and blew a whistle. (She was so proud that she knew how to do that; the lifeguard at the YWCA pool had taught her when she was fourteen.)

"Let's try this again. I'll start with you, Naomi. What is this about?"

The brunette—Naomi Haslett—shook her head with exaggerated dismay. She was the late Gordon Haslett’s sister, and had been the co-owner of the inn along with him. Her hair was pitch black—the color of shoe polish—and cut bluntly into a Louise Brooks bob, with razor straight bangs slicing across her wrinkled forehead. Her face was pale and craggy, and Antonia couldn’t help but think that her hair color actually aged her. Naomi would do much better with a softer look across the board, especially since every interaction Antonia had had with Naomi proved that her character was as sharp as her haircut.

Naomi pointed at the other woman, the sexy blonde whose name fittingly happened to be Barbie, and who was Gordon’s girlfriend at the time of his death. “Antonia, I think you should call the police. She is *trespassing* on your property.”

This was interrupted by Barbie’s furious rebuttal. “I am not! It’s my stuff!”

“Barbie, you will have a chance to talk,” said Antonia, silencing her. “Naomi, continue.”

Naomi gave Antonia a slight smile while Barbie glowered. “Like I said, Barbie is *stealing*. That box in her hands? It’s yours . . .”

“ . . . Is not! It’s mine!”

“Barbie!”

“Listen, Antonia,” said Naomi, “When I sold you the inn, I sold it lock stock and barrel. Everything from the doors to the hinges, right?”

“Yes,” concurred Antonia.

“Well, according to our agreement, that included the boxes

that were in the storage areas. And now this woman has snuck into your inn and is taking *your* box!”

“It’s mine!” protested Barbie.

Antonia turned to Barbie. “Now let’s hear from you.”

Barbie Fawcett pressed the box firmly to her chest, smashing her ample bosom in the process. “You said, Antonia, that I could take any of my belongings out of the inn. I had forgotten about this box, so I came here to retrieve it.” Her voice was flustered and husky, and in the tussle with Naomi bits of mascara had flaked off her lashes and landed in black dots on her rouged cheeks like measles.

“It’s not your box,” snapped Naomi.

“Yes, Naomi, it is mine.”

“May I ask, what is in the box?” asked Antonia.

From behind Antonia, Lucy spoke. “It’s nothing, some old notebooks that Gordon used to jot down to-do lists and things like that.”

“Lucy, stay the hell out of it,” snapped Barbie, craning her long swan neck in Lucy’s direction.

“Barbie, that’s not necessary . . .” said Antonia.

“Does she really need to be here for this?” asked Barbie impatiently. “I’m just wondering when that woman will disappear forever. She’s like a tick that just keeps hanging on. Doesn’t know when to leave. Lucy, it’s over. Go home.”

Lucy reddened. “Say what you want, Barbie. But I ran Gordon’s office. I went through everything when he died. I’m not sure what you’re looking for, but it’s just a bunch of office notes.”

Barbie tapped her foot impatiently and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “Is this how you’ll get your revenge?”

“I’m telling you the facts,” insisted Lucy.

“See, Barbie? You’re not going to find anything that you claim is here because it doesn’t exist,” said Naomi impatiently.

“I’m lost here. What is Barbie looking for in the first place?” asked Antonia.

Naomi shook her head with irritation. “She claims my brother had another will in which she stands to inherit the inn,” said Naomi. “But it’s all a lie. An exasperating lie. We just came from court where she is still trying to obtain a piece of my inheritance. But Gordon would have never left this . . . this . . . person . . . anything. I’m positive.”

“Naomi you’re forgetting that your brother and I lived together for *five* years. I’m not some one-night stand. We were in a committed relationship. I was his common-law-wife . . .”

Naomi scoffed. “Concubine.”

“I helped with the inn, day in and day out. It would not look like this if not for me,” Barbie said waving her arms around at the polished mahogany staircase, the gleaming wood floors carpeted in Oriental rugs and the brightly shined brass sconces. Antonia wanted to correct her and tell her it would not look like this if not for *me* and hundreds of thousands of my dollars, but she bit her tongue.

“What a joke,” scoffed Naomi. She turned to Antonia. “You can ask anyone, my brother was done with her. He was trying desperately to shake her. There are people who will vouch for that.”

“I know who you’re referring to, and Ronald Meter is

hardly a reliable witness,” replied Barbie before turning to Antonia. “That guy is a disgruntled former employee who Gordon fired when I told him that he was stealing money from the inn. He’s vindictive.”

“And so were you,” muttered Naomi.

Barbie narrowed her eyes to slits. “You know, Naomi, you were always jealous of me because you knew that Gordon would leave me his share. There is no way he would have left you anything! He thought you were a money-grubbing user who let him do all the work and tried to drain him of any profits. You always undermined him, since you were children.”

“I gave him the money to buy the place!” sneered Naomi with exasperation.

“And he paid you back in turn. But you never stopped. You were always shaking him down for money! That’s why he quit taking your calls. And that’s why he made sure that I would get his share. He showed me the will! I just need to find it.”

“You’ll never find it because it didn’t exist!” Naomi bellowed.

“Yes it does!”

“Oh, no it doesn’t! And now do you realize that it was a mistake to kill my brother?”

Antonia’s head shot around. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. This witch killed Gordon!” Naomi’s eyes were feverish, and her fists were balled up, ready to pounce.

Barbie snorted with disdain. She turned her head away and looked down. “You’re delusional. I wasn’t even at the inn when he died.”

“Am I? Am I?”

Antonia was beginning to feel dizzy. “Wait, wait. Time out, now. Gordon died of a heart attack, did he not?”

“Yes,” said Barbie firmly.

Naomi glared at her.

“Naomi, didn’t Gordon die of a heart attack?” prompted Antonia.

“Yeah, right, whatever.” Naomi rolled her eyes.

Antonia was exasperated. “No, *not* ‘yeah, right, whatever.’ Did he or did he not die of a heart attack?”

“Yes,” said Lucy from behind. “Heart attack.”

Antonia didn’t shift her gaze from Naomi’s face. “Isn’t that so, Naomi?”

Naomi looked down at her tennis sneakers. They were very clean white Reeboks that she had worn every time Antonia had met with her. She took some time to answer, after taking several deep, relaxing breaths that looked more appropriate for a yoga class.

“The official cause of death was . . . a heart attack,” she said at last, glaring at Barbie, who still wouldn’t meet her eye.

Antonia felt her heart race. “What was the unofficial cause of death?”

Naomi finally glanced in Antonia’s direction. She gave her a small smile, her lips curling enough so that her thin top lip disappeared into the bottom. The look reminded Antonia of a defiant child forced to lie to a teacher.

“Heart attack,” Naomi repeated before adding, “but I’d bet my bottom dollar that this tramp here figured out a way to cause it.”

Barbie snorted. “Like I said, I wasn’t even here when he died. How could I cause a heart attack?”

Antonia kept her eyes on Naomi. “Why didn’t you tell the police if you suspected it?” asked Antonia.

Naomi rolled her eyes. “I wanted to make sure I could sell the inn. No one would have bought this place if they thought Gordon was murdered. That’s my official story and I’m sticking to it.”